

# HOW CAN WE ENABLE PRISONERS TO WANT A BETTER LIFE?

*60% of those convicted of offences re-offend within two years at a cost to the taxpayer of c. £9.5 - £13 billion per year. In May 2018 the UK Government produced an Education and Employment Strategy for offenders that needed to 'start with offenders themselves'. Based on a Friday Conversation presentation in Rawthmells coffeehouse in March 2019, James Crabbe FRSA asks 'How can we enable prisoners to want a better life?'*

Only about 17% of people in prison manage to get a job within a year of release, with 75% of employers saying they won't hire a candidate because of a previous conviction. Employment, accommodation and family are crucial in preventing re-offending. The growth in the number of released prisoners sleeping rough is startling: 37 individuals in the quarter beginning on 1st October 2016 to 813 people in the quarter starting on 1st April 2018. Prisoners with a convicted family member are more likely to be reconvicted in the year after release from custody than those without a convicted family member. Research tells us that education helps those with convictions and reduces recidivism.

Education can't begin too soon. The Perry Preschool Project, carried out from 1962 to 1967, provided high-quality preschool education to three- and four-year-old African-American children ages 3-4 living in poverty and assessed to be at high risk of school failure. The average child-teacher ratio was 6:1. The curriculum emphasized active learning, reviewed by the children. The teachers also provided a weekly 1.5-hour home visit. When the children had reached the age of 40 years, the group who had undergone the programme had significantly greater earnings, and far fewer arrests. The greatest saving to the taxpayer was in respect of crime – an estimated \$171,473 out of a total public benefit of \$195,621, with a cost of only \$15,166.

Many prisoners have significant educational needs. Two-thirds of people in custody have numeracy skills at or below the level expected of an 11-year old. One half have a reading ability and 82% have a writing ability at or below this level. This lack of skills is a barrier to the person getting a job and plays a significant role in the possibility of re-offending.

In Britain, the Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) and the Prisoner Learning Alliance (PLA) provide important help to prisoners and ex-prisoners.

Analysis of nearly 6,000 prisoner records found that PET's beneficiaries re-offended a quarter less than the control group.

The Government's Strategy published last year gives a clear direction: *'Effective rehabilitation needs prisoners to engage with the opportunities in front of them, to build a different kind of life. They must be willing to commit to change, take advice, learn new skills and take opportunities to work – both during their sentence and after. Prisons cannot help people who are not willing to help themselves – but they can sharpen the incentives to help set prisoners on the right path.'*

And yet prison education has been failing. There have been declines in the number of people participating in learning whilst in prison last year (78,000 adults - down 12%), and in achieving qualifications (down 13%). The number of English and maths qualifications achieved has also plummeted - down 29% between 2011–12 and 2017–18.

So how can we provide the best education to those in prison and give them the best chance of success when they leave? We need to go beyond the Coates and Taylor Reviews of Adult and Youth Justice in 2016. There should be joint targets for education and for security. Education should be prioritized alongside security and safeguarding so it is more influential as part of prison inspections. These approaches need to be coupled with a culture change about prison learning with employers, and a culture change in society as a whole. Learning in prison should be about values rather than about costs. Prison education needs to be inspiring and motivational and must provide links to employment and 'real life' on release.

Are there pedagogies which can help prisoners? An *askit* approach, based on Philosophy for Children (P4C) and used in the Open Futures programme which helped over 50,000 primary school children in the UK over 10 years, supported by the Helen Hamlyn Trust and administered by Lucy O'Rourke, may be helpful. It allows learners to dream and achieve up to their full potential and beyond their sense of place. It is an active learning enquiry-based approach to teaching, learning and assessment that develops students' ability to think critically and creatively and learn independently. Enquiry is at the heart of *askit*.

- Every individual is valued for his/her unique experience and interests
- Key aims are to develop understanding and good judgement, and the sense of community grows as learners learn to listen to each other, building on each other's thinking and respecting differences
- Its power emanates from what students are able to do by the time they finish *any course at whatever level*.

*Askit* has also been used with great success in Further Education (FE), developed at Central Bedfordshire FE College for all students, including the most challenging Pathways students, where there are both learning and physical disabilities. An *askit* approach could be at the centre of educational strategy for prisoners.

*Askit* could also be used outside the prison setting, for example for young people with convictions in a [\*Campus\*](#) which was due to open in Haringey. The idea for *The Campus* builds on earlier work to develop a 'Young Offenders Academy'. This would provide a locally based facility that would integrate high quality education, training, accommodation and other services with a secure element and offer the courts an alternative to existing Young Offenders Institutions.

Addressing the shortage in skills in the United Kingdom requires a novel approach, not least for those people in prison, and for those young people brought before the Youth Courts. There is an opportunity emerging for new groups of actors to play a significant role in improving outcomes; these include members of the Judiciary and the Further Education (FE) sector. The RSA is a real catalyst for change in vital area to social wellbeing and health, as well as to improving the economy of the country and beyond.

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